CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

Document Citation

Title	**Kenneth, angered**
Author(s)	Johnny Ray Huston
Source	*San Francisco Bay Guardian*
Date	2000 Nov 01
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	58-59
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Anger, Kenneth (1927), Santa Monica, California, United States
Film Subjects	

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Kenneth, angered

The genius displays some verbal fireworks. *By Johnny Ray Huston*

Kenneth Anger's fireworks — magic works, committed to celluloid — light up to reveal portions of a personalized universe. A silent universe, soundtracked by potent music (1971's *Rabbit's Moon* features Mary Wells's obscure, fierce "Bye Bye Baby"), a universe of explosive ritual, populated and powered by machines and powder puffs, hard deities and fluffy bunnies — all alluring, all charged with meaning. And Anger the author has accomplished what Anger the filmmaker hasn't had the means to do: create a grand narrative tale. His *Hollywood Babylon* and *Hollywood Babylon II* use the historical materials — private and public lives — of the film industry to create a renegade epic to end all epics: a meta-Hollywood saga that illustrates greed and countless other deadly sins.

The 73-year-old Aquarius (with, of course, Scorpio rising) Anger says he misses the late Boyd MacDonald (author of *Cruising the Movies*), whom I'd consider his closest peer as a writer; moviewise, his disdain for Hollywood grows by the year, but he's keenly aware of film's endangered state, avidly noting the good works and bad taste of preservationists like "old playboy" Hugh Hefner and Hewlett-Packard inheritor David Hewlett. Half a century has passed since Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) first lit up a screen, but the director premiered a video (titled *Don't Smoke that Cigarette*) last month at the Silverlake Film Festival, and he has other works planned, including a long-awaited filmed version of Aleister Crowley's Gnostic Mass. At a different kind of ceremony, in conjunction with this year's Film Arts Festival, Anger — ironically, along with Matthew Barney, whose works owe a major debt to Anger — will receive a James T. Phelan Art Award and introduce screenings of two of his works.

Bay Guardian: *What's the status of Gnostic Mass?*

Kenneth Anger: It is all scripted and planned using a temple in Austin, Texas, with a group there — a lodge of the OTO [Ordo Templi Orientis] — that do it once a week. They're completely familiar with all the moves and the meaning. I just have a problem with funding, because I really wanna do it on 35mm.

BG: *I've read that various directors [Olivier Assayas, Paul Schrader] have been interviewed for a documentary about you.*

KA: The [documentary's] director is connected to the OTO. He's not a cameraman; he's what you would call an enabler. It was his idea to do a documentary, [interviewing] people like Alexandro Jodorowsky without me present. I've known Jodorowsky for 20 years or more; I'm thinking back to when I was living in London and he came by to see me with Dennis Hopper when I was filming *Lucifer Rising*.

Angered by Hollywood: Director Kenneth Anger lives up to his name with his contempt for contemporary Hollywood.

BG: *Do you like Jodorowsky's films?*

KA: I admire him as an artist. I believe strongly in animal rights, so his scenes of slaughtering chickens and so forth — I don't find that at all funny; I find it disturbing. I'm not myself a chicken, in the sense that I'm not squeamish. I've been through wars and revolutions and riots, but I happen to draw the line with animals. We remain friends, though we have a big difference on that concept. I've talked it over with him several times, and we decided that was his artistic adolescence. As someone who had a beloved rabbit when I was four years old, I'm not going to just sit back and smile at slaughter. I consider his films to all be one film — they're a river named Jodorowsky. You raft your way down it, there's rapids and whirlpools and all kinds of things.

BG: *How would you characterize your films?*

KA: They're like a coded autobiography, I suppose. Not that I'm being coy. The regret I have is that I've only made one [*Rabbit's Moon*] on 35mm — that was in Paris when some Russians making a documentary for Ionesco gave me some leftover black-and-white film. I always try to make my 16mm look as 35mm as possible. I appreciate the opposite aesthetic, which I guess you could call the Jack Smith aesthetic, but it's not my aesthetic.

BG: *Can you think of a contemporary version of* Fireworks' *sailor, or [1965's]* Kustom Kar Kommandos' *biker? Do current masculinity types hold any interest for you?*

KA: No. I've seen a number of films, usually shorts — in Outfests and things like that — where the filmmaker has personally called me, saying, "Oh, you were my great inspiration." I see the result, and I'm kinda chagrined; I wanna crawl under the seat, because it's too wimpy. It's not that I want violent things. Film as a medium is so easy to turn into mush; I want structure, I want intellect. It can be a very anti-intellectual subject, but I want some thought, and I don't see it much.

These guys — I don't know where they find the money, maybe they blackmail their parents — often work on 35mm. I don't want to sound like sour grapes, but as a matter of fact I am pissed off. [Laughs] Because they never say, "Oh, you're a pioneer; let a group of us produce a film for you."

I've had help over the years, through the Ford Foundation, and a New York State art grant. And the NEA — before Jesse Helms; I don't think he would approve. And I've had help getting things printed from Sir Paul Getty in England. People say, "Gee, with Paul Getty you won't have any more worries." Not true, he's extremely eccentric. He's had serious problems with his health, mostly his own fault.

BG: *You've used everything from Vivaldi to the Paris Sisters as music in your movies. What music strikes your fancy these days?*

KA: To me we've reached the nadir. This is just my personal taste. There is not one fucking thing I like. Eminem is a particular hate object. He's a prick.

BG: *You've had trouble getting the third volume of* Hollywood Babylon *published. What does it cover?*

KA: I'm covering up until current events, and it's a downer because I don't like contemporary Hollywood. And I don't like the films. People say, "Well, you should go see *Boogie Nights*." I thought it was a pile of shit. I happen to be familiar with the history of the porn industry, and I live in the [San Fernando] Valley, where five miles away they have studios out at Chatsworth. I've never worked for them, but I know editors and lighting technicians and people like that. [*Boogie Nights*] is a fairy tale.

BG: *A conservative, moralistic fairy tale. Are there any recent scandals you find interesting?*

KA: The trouble with scandals today — I'm talking about scandals in show business, related to the industry as they call it — is that nothing interesting

Shortsarama

Film Arts Festival unfurled

The Film Arts Festival is a movie fest where short works reign supreme. In fact, one of this year's highlights is exactly one minute long: hijacking home-decoration and fashion imagery like a lighthearted Martha Rosler, with "I Like Men" ("Hold Me with Your Robot Hand," Sat/4), Anne McGuire turns the soundtrack of an old advertisement for Sta-Prest pants and jeans into a first-person lust testimony punctuated with enthusiastic exclamation marks. S.F. may be increasingly inhospitable to artists who make short works, but the city gets the low-budget interrogation it deserves in "Frisco Disco" (Fri/3), a program that includes Dean Mermell's "Modern Life," in which dot-com domination submits to silent-film style.

The "Big Town/Small Town Show" (Thurs/2) program features Anne Alvergue's "Nightlight," a nuanced 16mm view of those — cleaners, homeless people, and a "night minister" — who toil while S.F. sleeps. But "Big Town/Small Town" 's visual highlight, Sativa Peterson's "The Handbook of What to Do," is a small-town survival guide for young girls. Peterson's previous work, 1998's "The Slow Escape," was a much darker look at small-town life: a transfixing first-person account of murder in Winslow, Arizona (a town, Peterson notes, best known as a place passed through in the Eagles' "Take it Easy"). The now Oakland-based Peterson's "Handbook" uses handheld video to capture numerous moments of tremendous beauty, from close-ups of mating ladybugs to mammoth roadside American skylines that Terrence Malick might admire.

Nguyen Tan Hoang contributes three short videos to this year's fest. "The Calling" ("Robot Hand," Sat/4) begins with a seemingly earnest confession: after a series of daughters, Nguyen's mother promised the Virgin Mary that if granted a son, that son would become a priest. By the time Nguyen presents a montage of priests — many played by closeted gay actors — from TV *(The Thorn Birds)* and film (*The Exorcist*, *Diary of a Country Priest*, *I Confess*, and other features), setting their journeys to the "Do you know where you're going to?" refrain of "Theme from *Mahogany*," he's granted his mother's wish in his own special way. "Pirated!" ("Woe and Wonder at Six and Under," Sat/4) is also humorously politicized: Nguyen recasts his family's boat journey from Vietnam to America as a pirate-porn adventure starring Burt Lancaster, Christopher Atkins, some foxy friends, and himself. The editing of both works — "Pirated!" in particular — is more characterful than the Hollywood star personalities they contain.

"Crimson," a short that Nguyen codirected under a pseudonym, provides a light finale to "Genderama" (Sat/4), a consistently strong program that ping-pongs back and forth between brief bursts of enthusiastic attitude (Ray Rea's "Straightboy Lessons") and longer — though not necessarily more detached — looks at gender restrictions and freedoms in America. Porter Gale and Laleh Soomekh's "XXXY" reveals the U.S. medical establishment's (and broader culture's) often terrible approach to children born intersex. Utilizing the famous Johnny Cash tune (a song that the video's subject is all too familiar with), Julie Wyman's S.F.-set "A Boy Named Sue" is an intimate portrait of years in the life of Theo, whose shift from butch dyke (name: Sue) to bi-transman involves a great deal more than replacing one set of labels with another. Wyman's street scenes have a keen critical eye, an eye focused on society's shallow vision. And Wyman's interviews with Theo and his (ex-)girlfriend tell a story about the identity changes that are part of *any* life.

The Film Arts Fest is dominated by short programs: others include "Borders and Boundaries" and "Dysfunction Junction" (Thurs/2); "Oh Yeah? Take That!" (Fri/3); "Teenage (R)Evolutions" and "Evolution/Revolution/Revelation" (Sat/4); and "Left Behind," "The Ultimate Connection," "What's a Family?," and "Have You Seen Me?" (Sun/5). Two of the fest's major events — Allie Light and Irving Saraf's *Blind Spot: Murder by Women* (Wed/1) and Patrick Donohew's *Seven Sisters: A Kentucky Portrait* (Fri/3) — are feature-length works. But in a sense, the title of the nature-based "Whole Films" program (Sat/4) also reflects the fest's overall belief that short works are *not* partial efforts: they're full-fledged, with sights and insights that you won't find in multiplexes, and they're worth checking out.

Johnny Ray Huston

Film Arts Festival info

The Film Arts Festival runs Wed/1–Sun/5. Opening night's "Blind Spot: Murder by Women," followed by a cocktail party, is at the Castro Theatre ($10 movie only; $40 party). Venues are the Castro Theatre (429 Castro, S.F.), Roxie Cinema (3117 16th St., S.F.), and Asian Art Museum (Golden Gate Park, S.F.). Call (415) 552-FILM for tickets, or go to www.filmarts.org or www.kozmo.com. Tickets are $8, $9 for Asian Art Museum shows. (415) 552-8760. The Phelan Award ceremony is Sat/11 (see "Kenneth, Angered" for more information). See Movie Clock, page 117, for Film Arts Festival show times.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

happens. Are the [current Hollywood] stories worth telling? I don't know. Like, there's a producer who has thankfully died [who] came from a Quaker background and went the other way when he got into Hollywood. All his sadism came out towards women. He'd pay these women to do the most degrading and painful things, and they weren't into S-M. He'd load them up with drugs so they didn't know which end was up. When he died, a huge sigh of relief occurred throughout Hollywoo He was a monster. But I don't find it that interesting.

I have a couple of pet hates in Holl wood. Travolta, Cruise, and Kidman - the whole Scientology gang are a bun of creeps. People have said, "Oh, you mustn't say that in print, or they'll put rattlesnake in your mailbox!" [Laughs] They're vindictive towards even whispers of criticism. The main chapter hanging up *Hollywood Babylon III* is th one on Scientology. Did you see *Battlefield Earth*? It's the most laughable piec of crap I've ever seen, and now Travolt says, "I'm going to make a sequel." Fine They can drain more Scientology money into it. I encourage them to make *Battlefield Earth 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.* [L. Ron] Hubbard was such a lousy writer.

BG: *Your work has been "borrowed from," to put it politely. There's everything from* Pink Narcissus *to David Lynch's soundtrack use of "Blue Velvet," a song you used in* Scorpio Rising (1964).

KA: You don't have to tell me. I have a book of curses I've written. What really bothers me is MTV. All the fine young cannibals have copied me frame by frame. They have no imagination.

BG: *Has the current government been any better than the Reagans in their dealings with you?*

KA: I made the mistake — a foolish bit of arrogance on my part — of insulting Nancy Reagan when she was first lady. I found a picture of her posing for artificial pearls when she was a model, which seemed so perfect, so I printed it. She never would have seen it, but I sent a copy to the White House and wrote, "Check out page so-and-so." [*Hollywood Babylon II*, page 315.] Two weeks later, the IRS put me up for audit. Now that's what you call A equals B. I don't do that anymore.

BG: *Personally and globally, what are you interested in today?*

KA: The world is like a theater, and the grand opera of hate going on in the Middle East is interesting to me, because I've spent time in Egypt, North Africa, Tunisia, and Morocco. Hate is a powerful turn-on; it builds and builds. Every rock-thrower shot in the forehead by a pissed-off Israeli soldier has brothers who vow vengeance. It's a self-perpetuating nightmare.

[Personally] I might have the opportunity, after all these years, of making a feature-length commercial film. It's been offered to me by one of the producers of *Natural Born Killers*. It's a movie called *Sex and Rockets* concerning the rocket scientist Jack Parsons, who was also a magician and student of Aleister Crowley. He died in an explosion — the story's a fascinating mix of science and the occult. But it's not gonna break my heart if I can't do it; in a sense, it's something I should have done 20 years ago. I've been able to write on my own — writing on celluloid — poems or sometimes haiku, but in my fantasy I'd like to do epic things.

BG: *Are you looking forward to visiting San Francisco?*

KA: I have fond memories of the city. I hear these reports about the dot-coms, and I've thought that I can't even afford to visit. But the Film Arts Foundation is kindly paying for my flight, plus a hotel room. My distributor, Canyon Cinema, is based in San Francisco, but they may get priced out. Still, it's a beautiful city, and they can't really wreck it — unless they decide to tear down those Painted Ladies. ❖

'Kenneth Anger, Visionary,' *the Phelan Awards program, is presented by the Film Arts Foundation and the Bay Area Video Coalition in collaboration with the San Francisco Cinematheque at the San Francisco Art Institute.* Lucifer Rising *and* Eaux d'Artifice *screen Sat/11, 7 p.m., followed by a reception and awards presentation. 800 Chestnut, S.F. Free. (415) 552-8760.*

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)